

## Everyone deserves a best buddy

BY JAIME RIGGS IRVINE WORLD NEWS

Vita Hummer searched the crowd to find her best buddy Saturday when the Orange County Best Buddies Organization threw a luau bash at Turtle Rock Community Park for all its members and volunteers.

Hummer's friend was nowhere to be found. When she was told that her pal was unable to attend the festivities, she searched the crowd again in the hopes of finding another buddy. As people arrived Hummer would ask, "Are you my best buddy?"

Best Buddies is a non-profit organization that provides care to people who have intellectual disabilities by providing them opportunities for one-on-one friendships and employment. Founded in 1989, the organization has spread to more than 1,000 middle school, high school and college campuses internationally. Programs are active in all 50 states and in Canada, Colombia, Cuba, Egypt, Ireland, Mexico, Philippines and Sweden and other countries.

According to the organization's Web site, there are 14 million college students in the United States and 77 million college students worldwide that volunteer for the organization. In Orange County, the organization has 600 volunteers. In addition to the campus-based activities, volunteers can connect with a best buddy online through the e-Buddies program.

"I found out about it through the internet actually, said Avery Maglinti. "I was looking for volunteer opportunities and thought this was perfect."

Maglinti, 26, works as a systems analyst during the day and is a best buddy to Irvine resident Steven Tanoue, 20, during his free time. Maglinti said he talks to Tanoue on the phone every week and they also try to meet in person two or three times a month.

"We try and do a lot of outdoor activities like basketball, soccer and we go to the movies," he said. "We try to do every event that Best Buddies puts on, too."

To volunteer for the program, the process is similar to applying for a job. The procedure includes a questionnaire, an interview, a background check, a home visit and references. The organization compiles all the information and, depending on similarities, available time and location, matches a volunteer with a buddy.

Irvine resident and volunteer Joe Choi, 33, said it took four months to get matched up with his best buddy, Bobby Spitzberg, 45.

"We feel pretty fortunate to be stuck together, because when I first volunteered they couldn't find a match for almost four months," Choi said. "Bob was in limbo too, so it was kind of slow, but the timing worked out because it was a great match."

Spitzberg was formerly in a Best Buddies program in Florida and still corresponds with his former pal. He said that the time Choi and he spend together is good for both of them.

"I told them I was looking for a buddy to do things with on the weekends to occupy my time and stuff like that," Spitzberg said. "I like to listen to music when I'm not working, I like the '50s and

the '60s music." Gina Allen, the high school program coordinator, said they ask all participants to communicate with their buddy at least once week by phone or through e-mail and make plans for an outing twice a month.

"Usually Selena Dickenson, (citizen program manager) and I will plan some type of outing for the entire county," she said. "We'll plan a Mighty Ducks game, Angels game or we'll have a movie night.

"People with intellectual disabilities don't have to be in best buddies," Allen said. "They are enrolling themselves to be in this program; they are volunteering themselves as well."

When a volunteer has to leave the program, it's hard on everybody because a real friendship has been made, Allen said.

"It's a real friendship and it goes both ways," she said. "A lot of the times the volunteers have family issues or challenges that come up in their lives and they have to lose contact with their buddy, and not because they want to but unfortunately stuff happens. We have to deal with that in any other relationship, so it's normal."

More than 200 volunteers and best buddies showed up for Saturday's luau. Activities included a nature trail, Hawaiian names, T-shirts, candy leis, paper hula skirts, fake tattoos, food, dancing, and prizes.

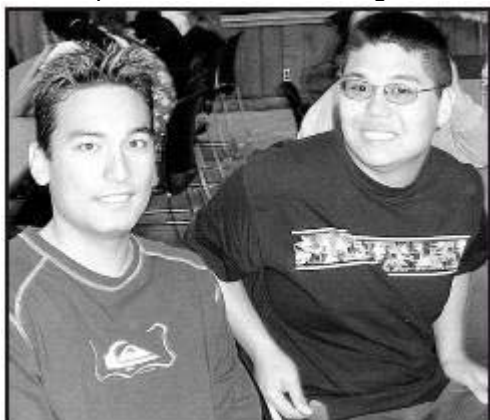
With a candy lei around her neck and a hula skirt around her waist, Veta Hummer looked like she was enjoying the afternoon's events. She also had found a best buddy for the day, Clark Hahne, 29, who thought volunteering for the organization would be a good thing to do. Although he already had been matched up with someone, he said he was happy to be Veta's buddy.

"Veta lives there (Ashling Center, a group home in Costa Mesa). She might not be affiliated with the (Best Buddies) program, but they will bring them to things like this," he said. "Maybe only four of them will have best buddies, but they will bring 16 of them here so they can hang out and feel involved and be a part of it."

Dickenson, the citizen program manager, said the organization offers a variety of volunteer options.

"We do have other volunteer opportunities in the office that include planning events or being a birthday buddy for the day," she said. "There are all kinds of opportunities if they don't have time to fill the main requirement."

For more information contact Selena Dickenson at (714) 546-1826 or visit [www.http://www.bestbuddies.org](http://www.bestbuddies.org).



Avery Maglini (far left) and Steven Tanoue paired up as buddies.



John Kim helps Ryan Potsdam create a hula outfit (left).



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**Wendy John** (second from left, above) and **Kathy Swain** (second from right) get a little help from volunteers as they work on handprints.

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